Worker: Rig Was Bustling Before BP Well Blowout

Michael Kunzelman, Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS (AP) — A worker who survived the deadly explosion on the Deepwater Horizon testified Wednesday that a flurry of activity on the drilling rig hindered his ability to monitor BP's well for signs of trouble before the April 2010 blowout.

Joseph Keith, the second rig worker to testify in person at a federal trial over the disaster, said he never saw any indications that a blowout was brewing before drilling mud started raining down on the rig floor just before the blast. The blowout triggered an explosion that killed 11 men and led to the nation's worst offshore oil spill.

Keith, a mud logger employed by a unit of Halliburton Co., said rig workers were performing several other tasks — including operating a crane — that made it more difficult for him to monitor the well for signs of a "kick," or unexpected flow of fluids into the wellbore. He said the rig typically ceased other activities while workers were engaged in the delicate task of displacing drilling mud with seawater.

Keith, however, testified during cross-examination by a lawyer for rig owner Transocean Ltd. that he was still able to perform his job "fully and capably." He also said he would have alerted supervisors if he saw or heard anything unsafe happening on the rig.

It was Keith's job to monitor well conditions and report any red flags to a BP rig supervisor and drillers employed by Transocean Ltd. He described himself as a "second pair of eyes" on data that could have showed them that BP PLC's Macondo well was unstable.

"You missed this kick, did you not?" plaintiffs' attorney John de Gravelles asked.

"A lot of people missed the kick, sir," Keith responded.

He said later than he has more than 20 years of experience and caught roughly a dozen such "kicks" before the Deepwater Horizon disaster, without ever missing one.

Keith said BP ultimately was in charge of orchestrating the operations and could have stopped other activities during the displacement process.

Choking back tears, Keith said he doesn't have any regrets about his actions on the rig on the night of the explosion.

"I'm sorry it happened," he said. "I wish it would have never happened."

In May 2010, he told BP investigators he never left his office before the explosion, which happened about four hours after his shift began. As part of a settlement with Halliburton, Keith signed a release on the same day of his interview with BP and other companies involved in the drilling project.

However, Keith said a therapist later helped him remember that he had taken a break lasting eight to 10 minutes about an hour before the blowout.

Keith said he looked back at all of the real-time data that he missed during his break, but he didn't see any fluctuations.

In his pretrial deposition, Keith said he would have called the rig floor if he had noticed increases in drill pipe pressures.

Keith agreed when de Gravelles asked him if the blowout was an "absolute surprise" to him.

"It happened instantly," he said.

Keith's testimony came on the 11th day of a non-jury trial that started Feb. 25 and could last several months. Barring a settlement, U.S. District Judge Carl Barbier could decide how much more money that BP and its contractors owe for their roles in the catastrophe.

BP could be on the hook for nearly $18 billion in penalties under the Clean Water Act if the judge finds that it acted with "gross negligence."

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